

Animal OXON
Level III bone report (Drayton Cursus) 1980-82

By Bob Wilson

Some 400 fragments were obtained by excavation; most being dated to the Saxo-medieval period and small groups to the prehistoric and Romano-British periods. Bones from the early deposits are mostly preserved poorly. Those from higher levels of the gravels are whitened and eroded by leaching. A few from waterlogged deposits in the cursus and many from the Saxo-medieval gully are better preserved.

Not all the dating of bones is entirely secure even with the exclusion of some unreliable data from Table 1. The majority of the prehistoric bones however are from early and later deposits in the cursus and this appears to be a useful context in which to consider their deposition which apparently extended over a lengthy period.

A high proportion of cattle, presumably domesticated varieties, are present among most groups of bones. Pig is moderately represented in the early deposits and with significant occurrences of aurochs Bos primogenius (unfused distal radius, width 92mm; broken 3rd phalanx, DLS 90+ mm) horse (scapula) and red deer antler all within the cursus. Sheep is only prominent in the Roman group.

The Saxo-medieval bones approach the prehistoric groups in the percentages of cattle and pig but sheep and horse are more obvious and wild species are less prominent in the sample especially considering the better preservation of small bones. In this group 32% consist of fragments exceeding 10cm in size and work elsewhere suggests that the bones represent a peripheral scatter of large bones from the adjacent settlement (1) - not surprising, considering the slope of the hill. Cattle and horse bones may therefore be

overrepresented and sheep and pig underrepresented as far as typicality of settlement debris is of concern. Nine large bones are also present among the prehistoric group but the percentage of large bones and coarse debris is difficult to estimate because of poor preservation and newly broken unidentifiable bones (10-35%). In any case sheep are unlikely to have been abundant in this group due to cultural reasons.

Probably sheep, pig and smaller animals are underrepresented in the prehistoric and Roman groups because of poor preservation but therefore the disproportionate representation of pig over sheep in the prehistoric groups becomes more important to interpreting the results.

Discussion The proportions of cattle and the larger fragments among the Neolithic and Bronze Age bones indicate a scatter of debris which lay peripherally to any main areas of occupation, but this conclusion may be biased from the possible degradation of many smaller bones and the probable low ancient abundance of sheep. Also some bones are from widely spread features and any centre of intensive occupation activity is not evident.

Collectively these early periods indicate either, a partly grassed and partly wooded landscape, or a predominantly wooded and scrubby environment. The latter is favoured by the occurrence of the aurochs and red deer in such a small sample as well as pig and domesticated cattle which are adaptable to woodland conditions. Probably plant cover for wild animals was more extensive than near the Abingdon causewayed enclosure, where the representation of red deer and aurochs appears small.(2)

Iron Age deposition is scarcely represented but one fragment appears to be of a deer metacarpal so that the extent of woodland may not have changed much during the prehistoric period. Alternatively the few bones may be redeposited earlier debris.

Table 1: Fragment numbers and percentages of bones excavated from the vicinity of the Drayton Cursus near Abingdon 1981-82

| | Neolithic | | Total f | % | Late Neolithic- Bronze Age | | Romano- | | Saxo-medieval | |
|---|-----------|----------------|---------|----|-------------------------------|----|---------|----|---------------|----|
| | Cursus F4 | Other features | | | f | % | f | % | F | % |
| Cattle <u>Bos sp (domestic)</u> ^a | 11 | 3 | 14 | 70 | 10 | 83 | 3 | 20 | 59 | 67 |
| Aurochs <u>(Bos primigenius)</u> | 2 | - | 2 | 10 | - | - | - | - | - | - |
| Sheep | - | - | - | - | - | - | 9 | 60 | 10 | 11 |
| Plg | 2 | - | 2 | 10 | 2 | 17 | - | - | 12 | 14 |
| Horse | 1 | - | 1 | 5 | - | - | 3 | 20 | 5 | 6 |
| Dog | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Red deer | A | 1 | 1 + A | 5+ | 2? | ? | - | - | A | + |
| Rabbit/hare | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Identified | 16 + A | 4 | 20 + A | | 14 | | 15 | | 88 + A | |
| Unidentified | 15 | 3 | 18 | | 82 | | 12 | | 195 | |
| Total | 32 | 7 | 39 | | 96 | | 27 | | 284 | |
| Burnt | - | - | - | | 3 | | 1 | | - | |
| Oyster | - | - | - | | - | | - | | 1 | |
| Goose domestic/greylag | - | - | - | | - | | - | | 1 | |

A = Antler fragment

a It is not possible to make a definite identification of domesticated stock from morphological characters of the prehistoric bones.

In contrast the Roman group is indicative of an open countryside although not incompatible with hedges or some relict woodland. Celtic rather than Romanised occupation refuse is indicated by the ratio of sheep and cattle bones which appears comparable with settlement refuse in central Abingdon but not at Barton Court Farm villa.(3)

By previous arguments, some woodland was present during the Saxo-medieval period but much less than early prehistoric times since only deer antler is present and pig is not abundant. There are also no compelling reasons to believe that Saxon or medieval cattle were strongly associated with woodland. Meadowland is most probable. The habits of cattle and even pig are modifiable by husbandry so that environmental indications from bones require support from other evidence. Finally, it has been noted (4) that cattle may be overrepresented and that a more typical sample would contain a higher proportion of sheep bones thus altering environmental inferences.

Nevertheless the Saxo-medieval bones are the most convincing evidence of intensive occupation and presumably of a pastoral meadowland and arable farming settlement. A polished articulation surface of the femur head may indicate the use of cattle for traction. A large horse metatarsal (GL 287mm) indicated an individual standing 1.48m at the shoulder and is comparable to the size of two horse skeletons at Roman Farmoor. (5)

Footnotes

1. R. Wilson, unpublished Bone reports on Mingies Ditch, Hardwick with Yelford, and Harding's Field, Chalgrove, Oxon.
2. C.L. Cram, Animal bones in H.J. Case and A.W.R. Whittle Settlement patterns in the Oxford region: excavations at the Abingdon causewayed enclosure and other sites C.B.A. Research Report 41 (1982), 43-47.
3. R. Wilson, The animal bones from the Broad Street and Old Gaol sites (Abingdon), Oxoniensia 41 (1975), 105-121; unpublished reports on St. Helens Mews, Chequer Walk, Abingdon; and in D. Miles, Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, C.B.A. Research Report 50 (in press).
4. Op.cit., footnote 1.
5. R. Wilson, the vertebrates, in G.H. Lambrick and M.A. Robinson, Iron Age and Roman settlements at Farmoor Oxfordshire, C.B.A. Research Report 32 (1979), 128-133.